



JOHN FUNG / Los Angeles Times

Frank Dux's claims were the inspiration for the movie "Bloodsport," but it is difficult to prove the martial arts contest ever happened.

It's Friday night at the drive-in. As the pale-skinned hero of the season's hot new martial-arts flick snaps the bones of the Asian archvillain, the Winnetka 6 erupts in honking horns and flashing headlights.

The movie that has the big-wheeled pickups beeping is "Bloodsport." Advertised as the true story of an American who defeated all comers 13 years ago in a no-holds-barred international tournament of warriors, the movie opened last month at 800 U.S. theaters after successful exposure on the West Coast.

The film is the latest and most widely spread chapter in the improbable story of Frank Dux of Woodland Hills. It chronicles his training by a Japanese master warrior named Tiger and his eventual victory in the hush-hush competition in the Bahamas. And it lends credence to, although does not mention, other aspects of his romantic tales of warfare and adventure. His covert mission in Southeast Asia. His secret Medal of Honor. His battle against Philippine pirates to rescue a boatload of orphans.

Macho Fantasy

Dux, a powerfully built 6-footer who operates martial arts schools in Woodland Hills and North Hollywood, has told the story over the years to students and martial arts magazines. It's splendid stuff, obviously—the stuff that movies are made of—and critics say it is about as real as the average macho fantasy.

Military records show that Dux never ventured closer to Southeast Asia than San Diego. His only known war injury occurred when he fell off a truck he was painting in the motor pool.

Ninja Hero or Master Fake?

Others Kick Holes in Fabled Past of Woodland Hills Martial Arts Teacher

By JOHN JOHNSON, Times Staff Writer

Dux's trophy from the Bahamas event was at least partially made in the San Fernando Valley, the trophy maker said. The ceremonial sword he won in the fights was sold, Dux said, in a failed attempt to buy freedom for the Philippine orphans.

Dux argues that his claims are difficult to prove or disprove because of the secrecy surrounding both his military record and the clandestine tournament. He said his life story can be verified by a few witnesses who say they saw the blood-gushing fight in the Bahamas and received top secret messages from him while he was in the military.

The real story of Frank Dux, say many who know him, is one of a bright but undistinguished young man who, using cleverness and chutzpah, re-created himself as a super-hero a decade ago, painstakingly authenticating his new persona with military medals, trophies and newspaper clippings of questionable origins.

Through the years, his story has flourished amid the hazy braggadocio of the American martial arts industry, a field peculiarly vulner-

able to fakery, according to several experts.

"Anybody can buy a \$4 black belt and set himself up," said Chad Minge, a martial arts instructor in the Valley.

As martial arts rose to new heights of interest in the United States in the 1970s, so did the competition to recruit students. Many instructors found that an exaggerated resume could increase revenue. The exaggerations led to hard feelings among other martial artists, and occasional threats.

"Paranoia abounds in the field," said David Weiss, editor of Ninja magazine in New York. "Most Ninja people I go out with won't sit with their back to the door." Most, however, "can't fight their way out of a paper bag."

Dux's magnetic character and legitimate martial arts skills drew students to his schools and propelled him into the spotlight. Armed and looking as dangerous as he always claimed to be, he appeared in national martial arts magazines, showed a network television audience how he taught martial arts to a cerebral palsy victim and impressed Sylvester

Stallone with his kick-boxing.

Dux's version of his life story portrays him as a nerdy child in North Hollywood, the older of two sons of an immigrant European Jewish family. His father, Alfred, fought against the Nazis and would "play games with me to expand my awareness," Dux said. "Sometimes he would throw things at me unexpectedly to improve my reflexes," Dux was quoted as saying in a June, 1982, article in the Los Angeles Valley College magazine, Crown.

But young Frank was still a "joke" in the neighborhood when he said he was taken under the wing of a Japanese expatriate, who trained him in the ways of the ancient Ninja, the warrior class that arose in feudal Japan in the rural, mountainous Koga and Iga regions. Ninjitsu is the art of self-protection adopted by the Ninja, an art that so successfully taught hit-and-run attacks that the Ninja developed reputations as invisible warriors.

'Kinship Like No Other'

"We developed a kinship like no other," Dux said of his relationship with his "world-famous" teacher, Senzo ('Tiger') Tanaka, who Dux said was the descendant of a warrior line 40 generations long.

"When the boy reached 16 years of age, Tanaka brought him to Japan, to the legendary Ninja land of Masuda," Dux said in a manuscript he and an associate wrote about the Ninja and Dux's role as the modern heir of a great line of black-robed fighters. "There, the boy's outstanding abilities shocked and pleased the Ninja community when he tested for the right to call himself Ninja."

Pressed in an interview for details, Dux said he did not know

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where Tanaka's family is and said he is not even sure if Tanaka is dead or alive. The manuscript states that Dux's teacher was found dead on July 30, 1975, and was buried by a Ninja clan in California.

No trace of Tanaka could be found in historical texts or from independent martial arts experts. California state death records show no Tanaka dying on July 30 of any year in the '70s. Told of the findings, Dux said the man was living under an assumed name.

Shoto Tanemura, a Japanese who is one of a select group of recognized Ninja masters in the world, said in an interview in Los Angeles last week that he had never heard of Dux or Tanaka. "There is not Mr. Tanaka in Japanese history" of the Ninja families, Tanemura said.

Well-Known Master

Tanemura, who was interviewed over tea at a meeting with American martial arts instructors, said the nickname Tiger was used by a well-known master in Japan, who is dead. "Many crazy guys stand up as Ninja masters," Tanemura said.

That is not to say that the Tanaka name has no meaning. Millions of Americans were first introduced to Tiger Tanaka in the Ian Fleming novel "You Only Live Twice," in which Agent 007 befriends a Japanese agent by that name.

"Ian Fleming used to base his characters on real people," Dux explained.

Dux said it was Tanaka's dying wish that his student go to the Kumite—an invitational tournament without rules—being held in Nassau, Bahamas, to choose the world's champion hand-to-hand warrior.

Dux claims he became the first Westerner to win the championship, decided every five years, setting world records, including most consecutive knockouts (56) and fastest punch with knockout (0.12 of a second).

'Nobody Understood It'

"I discovered my own way, my own method, my own style," Dux said. "Nobody had ever seen it before. Nobody understood it."

Few martial arts experts seem to believe the story. "I don't think anyone in the world can do that," Curtis Wong, editor of Inside Kung Fu magazine, said of the knockout streak.

Jim Coleman, the editor at Black Belt Magazine in Burbank, said the movie is built "on false premises and poorly acted. From what we can ascertain, there never has been a competition like this."

"It's a nice story," said Chuck Cory, a Kung Fu instructor in Burbank, but he said he does not believe it.

"We have no recollection of such a tournament," said Kenneth Wilson, a spokesman for the Ministry of Sports in the Bahamas. Told that the tournament was a secret, he said: "We would know. No, never. It can't happen."

Dux said his critics are part of a conspiracy to discredit him involving a Moriarty-like archenemy half a continent away.

"They're all in this melodrama," he said of a roster of critics.

The enemy Dux refers to is Stephen Hayes, regarded by many as the best-known Ninja trainer in the country. Dux said Hayes perceives him as a threat and, as a result, he or his agents have tried to undermine him in California

martial arts circles.

Hayes, the author of several books who lives in Ohio, denies that. Hayes also said he has taken steps to protect himself against threats from both coasts.

"There's quite an extensive security system that operates around me," Hayes said.

A brochure for Dux's ninjitsu schools lists him as "one of the most decorated veterans of the Southeast Asian conflict."

Visitors to his home were shown newspaper articles about him, including an editorial titled "A Silent Hero" that Dux said he clipped from the Washington Star. Told later that the newspaper's archives have no clippings about him, Dux said he could not remember the source of the editorial.

The piece quotes from a commanding officer's diary:

"We're hungry. We're tired. We're all out of ammo. We all might go mad if not for a spunky kid named Duke for short." The diary describes Dux crawling through a mine field to rescue an Asian baby that he later turned over to a Taoist priest.

"When we almost gave up, the Duke, by himself, charged the gun. The next thing you know, the Duke was behind the gun, cutting the enemy to pieces. He must have killed a hundred . . . at least. He turned defeat into victory."

'Flighty Ideas'

The story evaporates upon inspection, according to military records. The Marine Corps said that Dux served from 1975 to 1981 and that there is no indication he ever left the United States.

His military medical file, according to those who saw it, said that on Jan. 22, 1978, he was referred for psychiatric evaluation for expressing "flighty and disconnected ideas." Though a member of the reserves, which meant he was on active duty only a short time, he reportedly insisted that he was working for an intelligence agency.

A follow-up medical evaluation at a military psychiatric clinic in Long Beach on April 18 of that year

found him normal, but seemed to scotch any further talk about his intelligence work, saying that his only possible intelligence work was being "cursorily" involved in gathering information about one individual.

Dux said the military ordered his record sabotaged to discredit him. The government did not know how much he knew about other covert operations, he said, so they placed information in his file to destroy his credibility.

Dux received his military decorations, he said, after pressing the military to authenticate his heroics. One day, he said, he received a phone call and went to an address in West Los Angeles, where he was handed a paper bag filled with medals.

Ribbons Out of Sequence

Marine Lt. Col. John Shotwell in Washington said Dux's military file shows there is "no indication in there anywhere" that Dux received any military awards.

After seeing a picture of Dux in uniform with his medals, Marine Lt. Col. David Tomsky in Los Angeles said several ribbons were worn out of sequence. Based on that and other discrepancies, Tomsky said he seriously doubted the medals and ribbons were Dux's.

A former teacher of Dux's at Grant High School in Van Nuys, Joe Feinstein, said Dux returned to his class in recent years and displayed "boxes and boxes" of medals and certificates, including, he believes, a Medal of Honor.

Dux has an explanation for that. "I . . . spoke to that teacher and to that class and made it clear that it doesn't become official until the orders are declassified."

Told about Dux's claim, Tomsky said: "I do not believe there has ever been an instance" of the Medal of Honor being bestowed secretly. He also said the medal Dux wore in the photo was an Army medal, not a Marine medal.

Dux acknowledged that his military record is confusing and blames the government. He said he has not been able to get the military to explain why he was given medals

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from different branches of the service.

Intense, mercurial, with a personality that can range in a few seconds from humble to bullying, Dux is described again and again as charismatic.

"He must have a good rap because he's gotten away with it," said Benny (The Jet) Urquidez, a world champion kick-boxer who said he once told Dux to knock off the stories about beating him in a fight.

In an interview, Dux can be as quick as a record-breaking punch. At one point, he refused to give his age—he is 32—and claimed that he is known as the "warrior monk" because of his disavowal of marriage. He later acknowledged having been married.

One moment he talks eloquently of his desire to serve the community through his free rape counseling seminars. The next he lurches into free-wheeling imagery. For instance, there is his explanation in a Times interview of why he no longer has the ceremonial sword he said he won in the Bahamas.

'Went for Good Cause'

"I sold my sword. I have no regrets for it. It went for a good cause. It went to buy kids out of slavery" who were on pirate ships. "What they do is, these local chiefs, if you would, on Mindanao, and stuff, take these kids who are orphans, and they put them on these ships and go out to the South China Sea."

"The ships were crowded and uncomfortable. I'm talking what we call a normal bunk. They have four or five kids squeezed into that thing. They live out in the open elements. They die. And the Philippine government just turns a blind eye."

So, Dux said he and some friends decided to help out. He said he gave the pirates money from the sale of the sword, but the pirates reneged at the last moment.

"We took arms up and fought boat pirates and we got these kids free."

Many of them are now in the United States. "I'm in touch with some of them, and they love me to death. And, I'll tell you, I've got one kid who's about 15 years old. All I have to do is look cross-eyed at one guy, and he'll kill for me."

Claims Investigated

Dux said the Cannon Film Group, which made the movie, investigated his claims about the tournament exhaustively before paying for the rights to his story. Producer Mark DiSalle, who took the story to Cannon, said that his research "definitely convinced" him that Dux's story is factual and that he is considering a sequel about Dux's

military career.

Screenwriter Sheldon Lettich said: "Even we weren't able to verify the facts. We were taking Frank on his word." Lettich saw a huge trophy Dux once displayed at his school, which the article in the Los Angeles Valley College magazine said he brought back from the Bahamas.

When officials of a trophy shop in North Hollywood, the W.R. Moody Co., were shown photos of the trophy, they said the base and ceramic plaques were made by their company.

Dux said it was given to him by a former tournament official in 1980.

An organization sponsoring the tournament, Dux said, was the International Fighting Arts Assn., which Dux said is a warrior society. That organization is hard to locate. The IFAA trail seems to lead only to Dux's door. The invoice for another IFAA trophy lists him as the only contact for the organization.

Dux said the IFAA probably ordered the trophy and he picked it up. He doesn't know what happened to the organization, he said. He broke relations several years ago because the organization wanted him to throw a fight, he said.

Many people have questioned Dux's claims in the past, but were silenced by his persuasive manner and the weight of the documentation he had amassed.

Among the earliest documentation was a 1980 Black Belt Magazine article called "Once in a Lifetime," in which the publication wrote that it researched Dux's claims about the Bahamas tournament and found them true.

Dux also produced a framed letter of praise from John Stewart, author of the Black Belt article.

Stewart, who now works at another magazine, said that after the article appeared, he received information that raised questions about Dux's military career.

No Retraction

"Sometimes we get caught," he said. "Sometimes we were naive enough to think this added up." Stewart said he wants to forget about Frank Dux.

Dux's attorney, Michael Lucero, said if Black Belt subsequently changed its mind about Dux, it owed its readers a retraction or correction. Since none has appeared, he said, the magazine must still stand by the story.

Coleman, the editor, said he was not there when the article was published, but suggested that proving Dux's claims to be false is just as hard as proving them true.

Another source that could authenticate his claims, Dux said, was Jeff Strompf, a diet technician at the Veterans Administration hospital in Sepulveda. Strompf verified

that Dux had served overseas.

Strompf said he met Dux in Naples, Italy, in 1976, when Dux was delivering top secret messages for the Army.

Told that Dux was in the Marines, Strompf responded: "I guess it was the Marines" for whom he was working.

Strompf said he was certain that Dux was there because he beat up four Italians who were bothering Strompf and a friend on the street. "I just stayed aside. I was in awe," Strompf said.

Another person Dux referred The Times to was Richard Robinson, a Philadelphia stockbroker who Dux said he first met at the Bahamas competition.

Research by The Times established that Robinson was a schoolmate of Dux at Grant High School, though Dux said he did not know him.

In telephone interviews, Robin-

son said he met Dux in the Bahamas. He said that Dux fought in the heavyweight class and that he fought in the 135-pound division.

Robinson said he was invited to the competition because he was a good street-fighter and an undefeated wrestler for three years at Lower Marion High School in Philadelphia.

Told later that the school's athletic officials don't remember him and that he doesn't appear in team pictures, Robinson first said he was ill the day pictures were taken.

Told that he could not be found in the school yearbook during any of his high school years, he said: "All right. I don't know what to say. Why is this movie so important to you anyway? Frank was a buddy of mine when I was in L.A."

Of Dux's story about the epic fight in the Bahamas, Robinson said: "If he says it's true, it's fine with me."